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SUBJECT: UNESCO CONFERENCE EXAMINES MEANS OF ENHANCING  
HISTORY OF SCIENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN ISLAMIC WORLD

1. Summary and Introduction: An international conference on "The Introduction of History of Science in the Higher Education Level of the Muslim Countries" took place December 15-16, at UNESCO; the conference was organized by UNESCO's Culture Sector, with the participation of the Natural Sciences Sector. The conference included roughly 25 participants, mainly academics in history, science and medicine from Muslim countries, including Syria, Iran, and Turkey. Two professors from American universities also participated.

2. The aim of the conference, according to one of the organizers, was to study means of enhancing the teaching of the history of Science at the university level in the Islamic world; knowledge of the pioneering achievements of Muslim scientists and scholars between the eighth and fifteenth centuries will encourage Muslim youth to pursue the study of modern science. The "hidden agenda" is to turn the attention of these youth from "traditional schools and fanaticism." Discussion of next steps (PARAS 4-9) was hampered by the fact that the event had not been coordinated with UNESCO'S Education sector. End Summary and Introduction.

3. Participants at the conference agreed that the history of science is often overlooked in secondary and higher education curricula. The utility of coursework in the history of science was discussed, with many agreeing that its dissemination is limited by the fact that some researchers claim that the study of the history of science will not enhance success in modern science. For this reason, additional efforts are needed to raise the interest of students in the history of science, outside the framework of the "religion versus science debate". It was agreed that in teaching the history of science in Muslim countries, the link between religion and science must be discussed, as there are over 750 verses mentioning science in the Koran. In addition, Historical influences must be considered when establishing curricula. Participants noted that few Muslim researchers and scientists are well known for their work, in comparison to Western researchers and scientists.

Participants from U.S. Institutions Outline Challenges

4. On day two, Dr. F. Jamil Ragep, a self-described Arab-American (Ph.D. Harvard) and acting-chair of the Department of the History of Science at the University of Oklahoma, highlighted the declining interest in the U.S. in teaching the history of science in the Islamic world. He said that prominent positions have gone unfilled at Harvard, Brown, Yale and New York University but that his own employer - the University of Oklahoma where he holds a permanent position in a history of science program - is a bright exception. He noted how odd it is that the University of Oklahoma is "more concerned about the history of Arabic/Islamic science than Cairo University. Sadly, this is the case."

5. Dr. Gul A. Russell, professor of History of Medicine and the Humanities at Texas A&M University Health Science Center (Ph.D. Indiana) suggested a task force to create guidelines, through UNESCO, to enhance the teaching of the history of science in the Islamic World at top institutions in the East and the West. She said these could be modeled on guidelines put out by the History of Science Society. (Note: the participation of the two American experts was described by a Culture sector contact as "invaluable". End Note.)

Training Trainers -- without the Education Sector?

16. Over the course of the conference, participants discussed possible "recommendations" that could emanate from the meeting. Participants agreed that in order to introduce the study of the history of science in universities in the Muslim world, more teachers - "trained in an objective way" -- are required. To achieve this, some participants advocated fostering inter-institute cooperation to develop a model curriculum. It was suggested that scholars, sponsored by Islamic universities, study the history of science in Western universities, including in the United States and Great Britain. This suggestion was dismissed due to the high percentage of students who do not return to their home institutions after completing such studies.

17. Despite the consensus on the need for more "training of trainers" to teach the history of science -- as well as on the need for more research and dissemination of findings -- precise modalities remained TBD. When a participant asked: "How do we train people in the history of science?", the absence of anyone from UNESCO's Education Sector was highlighted. The conference was organized by UNESCO's culture sector, with the participation of the science sector; no one with teacher education expertise from the Education Sector was present to field questions on this issue.

18. Participants also raised the possibility of UNESCO making a film highlighting the accomplishments of Muslim scientists. They tossed around other ideas before deciding to create a drafting committee to come up with recommendations to be shared with the UNESCO's Natural Sciences Sector. A culture sector contact envisaged two areas of future work: one relating to higher education -- he assured us that the Education Sector's input would be solicited; the other relating to the "popularization" of the history of science, via high school studies and publications. On funding, our contact confided that UNESCO's budget had provided 11,000 USD for the conference, the rest coming from "The World Islamic Call Society." Funding for any follow-up activities would need to be considered.

19. Comment: We find the lack of prior consultation with the education sector in preparing this event worrisome. Nilse Ryman, chief of staff to ADG/Education Peter Smith, said he would look into why there was no coordination between the science and culture sectors and the education sector in the run-up to this meeting. End Comment. KOSS